

Like the World's an Armchair

and throw my leg over the saddle. He looks longingly at me. You were good, I'd tell him, but he'd hardly hear over the deep throbbing of the bike's engine. You were real good while it lasted, lover, but I've got important letters to write.

Sleepers Almanac

I Feel So Strong

Venero Armanno

1.

If you can manage to keep yourself from becoming too anxious when you wake to discover someone using an electric power tool on your head, then it's safe to assume you're well on your way to making peace with your new circumstances. With a sort of odd sense of detachment I take note of the way these two attendants work methodically and fast, sawing my skull open and creating a lot of bone-dust as they go. Their Perspex goggles fog up with the fine spray but they don't stop until the job's done – out comes the brain.

The two boys handle it with plastic-gloved hands. I can hardly call these two individuals 'men' for they must be all of twenty years apiece, but they seem to be skilled apprentices in the little-discussed mechanics of a death's investigation. Their boss will come and check their work as soon as he finishes his coffee and Danish in the staff room, but he's got no need to worry: the intensity and curiosity in their faces is exceptional. They love their job. In fact, they make me feel special, though of course there's nothing much that's special about having dropped dead.

The extraordinary in this situation has nothing to do with them. Instead, it's my sense of pure sentence. Maybe it's like this for all fresh cadavers, I don't know. My body's well and truly finished but my mind is as alive as it's ever been. Possibly more so,

because I feel free from quotidian responsibilities. Nothing remains undone or half-done, as is usually the case in the ongoing frustrations of our daily lives. I don't have to fret about getting myself ready for work, finding a mechanic to fix that new knocking sound in my truck's transmission, buying groceries and eating more fruit and vegetables, or where and how will I go about getting some girl to sleep with me. All that's left, really, is to drift off into the white forever – but it doesn't happen.

Now these two young students of mortality and its limits carefully transfer my brain into a glass beaker. Awareness doesn't follow that slide into glass, no, it stays right here with my body. I guess this is where I am, then, attached to a corporeal self that was – for the most part, barring the encroaching decrepitudes of middle age – the fun part of me. A human body, but it's already inert, and will soon be rotting in the earth.

What a thought.

Back in primary school, the nuns believed they had a good grip on the mysteries of the great beyond. Heaven, hell, purgatory and limbo – each has its membership rules, though I remember hearing recently that the Pope, whatever his name is, might rescind the antiquated idea of limbo. Everybody will get to go somewhere; no one will go nowhere. This is good of him.

The nuns told us that there's no definite span of time defined for exactly how long the soul will remain with its body upon physical expiration. If the death is sudden and unexpected, stroke, car accident or gunshot, say, then it might stay where it is for a day or anywhere up to three or four. If the death is long and drawn-out, something like an octogenarian succumbing to a long bout of disease, then the soul will probably slide on out and be on its way almost immediately. In other words, it has been primed for departure and is absolutely ready to go.

Where the good nuns of the Holy Mother primary school got their information from I don't know, but everything they said was reinforced by the Christian Brothers at secondary school.

'Your flesh is weak,' Brother Connors told us in our first Religious Instruction class, 'but your soul is forever. That means this –' and he took a chunk of chalk and wrote a '1' on the board, then with a sense of theatre followed that number with zeros scrawled all the way off the chalk board. He went across all four

walls of our schoolroom, then he went around again, and again, and again, and again, without stopping. The chalk was worn down to a nub. It took him the better part of the lesson to get all the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of zeros he wanted. When the bell rang, he surveyed his handiwork.

'And even this will be the blink of an eye when it comes to the never-ending life God has blessed his children with,' he declared. 'Do you understand?'

Without warning, and with the force of an expert pitcher, he then hurled his chalk-nub at the side of the head of a boy named Lawrence English. Laurie was languishing at the back of the classroom picking his nose and staring at the pigeons cooing in the playground. The chalk hit him square in the temple. The boy started to cry.

'Well – try crying to the Lord.' A red, thick vein had appeared in Brother Connor's brow. 'Try crying to the Lord when your time comes.' In a whisper he added, 'So why not pay attention to your soul from now on? Can't you see it's the you that God is going to judge?'

We strained to hear that spooky whisper, and he terrified all the ten- and eleven-year-old boys in that room except for me. Why? I thought he was a clown. His sense of theatre was for the theatre of the absurd. He knew nothing. A year hadn't quite passed since the morning I went to wake my mother and discovered I couldn't. From that moment nothing much had the power to scare me, and certainly not a buffoon in a cowboy's black clothes, a white inverted collar yellowing with age, and with a zealot's belief in things that could simply not be proven.

Still, maybe I could have paid more attention. Maybe mad belief is proof enough of the existence of things: such as souls, eternity and the afterlife. I'm trying to remember if either the nuns or the brothers ever said what your soul was supposed to do while it was still stuck to its cadaver, or if there was a purpose to remaining so encased.

Whatever. Life – or maybe I should just call it existence now – never stops throwing challenges at you. Some are excruciating, some are just plain silly. This one seems more of the latter than the former, but I find myself in new terrain and I don't have a map. I don't know if I'm going to heaven, hell, in between, or

even – despite the Pope's promise – absolutely nowhere. No matter. Whatever happens I'll face it down. I'm certainly not the first to be stuck in a situation like this; soon enough things will become clear. At the moment my biggest task seems to be to keep any rising apprehension and disquiet at bay. Which is of course a little more easily said than done: I'm all too aware that the most pimple-faced of the morgue attendants is idly using a sponge to wipe off the skull cap he's helped saw off. He's humming a tune. Tufts of my hair are matted and wet. He peers into the empty cave of my head and I also get a glimpse.

Let me tell you, there are some things you don't want to see, dead or alive.

2.

Another sterile room; time has passed. I've slept, at least in the metaphoric sense. It could be a day or two later, but these are the sorts of measurements that mean less than ever.

Today I've been dressed in the clothes the boys from the band put together out of my closet at home. They chose my usual look: black T-shirt, jeans and lace-up hiking boots. If not for the fact that my blood was pumped out and my brain extracted, I'd almost be my old self.

Here's a memory: the embalming fluid that went in had been cold and dry, like a wind whistling through my veins. After a while that wind died and the fluid set like concrete. Now there's a thoroughly unfamiliar sensation. Something's in my stomach and it isn't some delicious meal. Ah, that'll be my brain. The cavity in my head has been stuffed with surgical padding – a nice enough term that really means they've wadded up the inside of my skull with lumps of those paper towels you take from a roll to clean up your kitchen messes. Then, because even the most devoted necromancers like shortcuts, and this has become the conventional practice, the two morgue boys deposited my brain into the slit they'd made when they dug out my guts to see what was inside. Sewed up my head and sewed up the smile in my belly, all is well.

None of these physical misfortunes should mean very much, they should be as inconsequential as Father Time, but I seem to retain enough human frailty that I wish my regular GP, Dr Bailey,

had said something like, 'Yeah, I saw this guy often. His heart wasn't going to last much longer. Had a balloon fitted eighteen months ago. I'm happy to sign the death certificate.' Instead, he'd come to see me on the morgue slab and declared, 'Lots of musicians around Max, better open him up and make sure this wasn't drug-related.'

It wasn't and now they know it.

I understand that my friends haven't arranged an open-coffin visiting session, so the stitching these two young apprentices made didn't need to be too perfect. No make-up required either. What I've got to look forward to is the bye-bye ceremony itself, at which time the coffin lid will be as tight as my sutures.

My mind, my glorious undead mind – or maybe I should give in to the nuns and brothers and call it my soul after all – tells me I should be cold on this table, but no, whatever sensation I have, none of it's really all that physical. Just the recollection of how things used to feel against my skin. Instead, I seem to be a floating ball of emotions and memories and moods. I'm not so anxious anymore, just sour. Sour because my veins have been filled with concrete, my skull has been stuffed with paper towels, in the place where glorious food and drink used to go I now have my dissected brain, and someone is using a dry razor, no shaving foam, to scrape the whiskers off my face.

I'm in a different place. It's no longer the morgue but a funeral home. The person shaving me is the other end of the spectrum to those apprentices. He's a wizened old man with a forest in each nose hole. What indignity to be toyed with by an individual who owns such fertile nostrils. Maybe he'll have an assistant in a slinky nurse's uniform, zip down just a little too much and a nice healthy cleavage. Maybe Father Concrete here dreams of allowing his hairy nose to rove over those merciless hillocks, taking in the perfume of young flesh after the iniquities of being the handmaiden to death day in, day out, no respite till Sundays.

No.

His assistant wears a green cardigan and is as old as he is. She has a limp, thanks to a titanium hip installed less than a month ago. Actually, she's feeling better than she has in somewhere between thirty and thirty-five years. I'm happy for her, yes I am – wish I could say the same for myself, really.

3.

Somewhere between thirty and thirty-five years: a black-haired hippie called Maree came to me right about then. So long ago but who'd ever forget? It was November 1973 to be precise.

I turned sixteen years of age on the twelfth of the month and was already something of a drummer by then, my jazz-drumming new stepfather teaching me just about everything I needed to learn. I met Maree at a friend's place while a little practice band I was in trashed surf music tunes with gay abandon.

The first days of being sixteen; I lost my virginity and betrayed my best friend, Joshua, at the same time. She was going out with him and he was foolish enough to bring her to the practice session, showing her off. Josh wasn't a musician, just one of the gang of useless teenage boys we all were, and he should have had the presence of mind to stay at home that day. He'd just discovered Dvorák and the cello; Maree couldn't get enough Hawkwind and drugs. We talked for about fifteen minutes. I was the only person she'd met who knew about a poet and performer named Bob Calvert, an American counter-culture figure she idolised. I only knew about him by chance. A couple of weeks earlier I'd stolen a new live Hawkwind double album from the local record store, and this nut called Calvert screamed maniacal lyrics and monologues all over the spacey music. To my jazz-trained ears it was all thoroughly unlistenable – but why tell a pretty hippie that? Maree stood a little closer while everyone else talked about whatever. I was already dying for her to touch my cock. Soon enough, she did.

She left Joshua to eat his heart out, and in the way of selfish young boys I felt guilty for less than a week. By the second week, that troublesome lump of human metal of mine was raw with the quick furtive soundless fucks Maree and I had in my bedroom while my stepfather watched television in the lounge. I didn't feel so guilty about my ex-best friend anymore. Sex makes you heartless. It also makes you want more. When we weren't at my place, Maree and I had long horny sessions in her older brother Michael's borrowed flat.

We'd go for hours at Michael's place, at the same time working our way through his knee-high stack of LP records. There I learned about women, love-making and rock music. For the rest

of my life, in my mind, the three would remain indivisible. *Led Zeppelin II* was perfect for the things Maree taught me, and we'd take a minute's break when the end of side one started ticking, then get going again with the wintry fervour of *Immigrant Song* at the start of side two.

Another break, what's next? *Who's Next*. We'd have it so loud Keith Moon's drum skins might as well have been my shoulders and back, as if he were wrenching his rolling beat out of my young muscle and flesh. We'd scream with Daltrey after that long synthesiser break in *Won't Get Fooled Again* and still not come. Eyeball to eyeball, staring straight into one another, we breathed each other's expirations and ground pubic bone against pubic bone. That's where the human soul starts, that's what we learned, in the raw aching pubis of sex-mad teenagers. Away from one another we were young, bored and stupid, but together the world was a long, loud song – with many more to come.

I'll ask her this from the coffin: 'Stick on another album from your old collection, won't you do that for me, Maree, if you're still alive somewhere? Bob Dylan said it better than me on that album *Blonde on Blonde* we used to eat each other up to: "Where are you now, Sweet Maree?"'

Of the two of us, she was the smarter and more well read. Maree introduced me to even greater pleasures by channelling Bobby Zimmerman, Marc Bolan and David Bowie. Her taste was eclectic. Alice Cooper was just getting big in Australia, so Maree would copy his death's mask make-up, wearing little pink hot pants and long silver boots with spiky heels. Somehow she'd have a fluffy feather boa to wrap around herself. She lived in op-shops, spent all her money on outrageous clothes. At sixteen she was already doing her own writing, and I'd take her raven hair in my fist and push my nose into her unshaved armpits, breathing the sweaty stench and silk of a poet.

Panting. Stop.

Then what?

Get shoved onto my back and Maree would say, 'Don't come. Do not come. Please don't,' and she'd grind her hips down into me. I only came as required. In his green days, a young man can do just about anything with his body. 'Whew,' she'd say. 'Fantastic. OK, another album.'

'You choose this time,' I'd tell her, 'I'm very busy.' Her fingers would leave wet fingerprints on Michael's much-adored record sleeves and vinyl. 'That one, *Billion Dollar Babies*, put that on.'

Naked, she'd crawl off on all fours, and while she was digging for it I'd take her from behind.

'I'm going to make it so loud,' I remember her telling me, her white rump in the air, her small breasts shaking and vibrating, flushed-pink face pressed down over her forearms. 'Wait. Stop for a second, let me get the needle down on this one, it's my favourite. Then you can fuck me all the way and you don't stop. You finish me off with Alice.'

Alice Cooper would sing, 'God/I feel so strong/I feel so strong/I'm so strong/I feel so strong' and for the first time in my life I knew exactly what it felt like, tingling gooseflesh covering my body at the raw power my Maree had led me to.

More weeks and more months and more records devoured like meat. Michael was a hospital wardman and kept strange hours. He didn't mind what his little sister was up to, so we had his flat all the strange hours we wanted. The only thing he asked was that we should sometimes vacuum his carpets. Small price to pay; I got to know that threadbare carpet well. Maree and I practically wore holes into it. He didn't want us to use his bed, and he expected that we would always restack his long players. Sometimes I'd leave a pot of soup on the stove for him, ready to heat when he came home to empty rooms still thick with sex. In those days I was already a pretty good drummer and an even better cook. It's not so bad to have an Italian stepfather: he had a quick temper but he loved Miles Davis and John Coltrane, strongly flavoured food with a bottle of red wine, and an artichoke-based liqueur called Cynar that he had his friends in Italy send over by the carton. We fought like cannibals but I ended up following him in almost everything.

I'd like a drink now, truly I would, a nice aperitif of iced Cynar. They ought to serve it in heaven.

Anyway, if Maree and I could scrape some cash between us, sometimes we'd buy exotic stuff and she'd make her brother some special delicacy, leave it in a casserole dish in the oven for him. Ham hocks with cannelli beans. Baked chicken breasts with rosemary and sweet potatoes. A dish she called Mongolian lamb.

For a hippie, she was quite a gourmet. In Brisbane in 1973 you had to try hard to find interesting epicurean ingredients; we weren't quite aware of it but we were in a complete cultural desert, and things wouldn't change for more than a decade. That didn't put Maree off. Thing was, the hippie era was already three or four years out of date anyway, so she could reinvent the sensibility in any fashion she wanted. She hated vegetarians, daisies and the acoustic guitar in the hands of any sensitive soul. The music of Simon and Garfunkel made her want to scream. The new era of sensitive singer-songwriters brought tears of frustration to her eyes. Poor James Taylor, Donovan and Elton John, they couldn't know what vitriol they inspired in one sexy, crazy, antipodean pseudo-hippie named Maree Klimister.

I was crazy about her. Anything she did or said was fine by me. Whenever we cooked for Michael, which was often, it gave us a break from our sexual proceedings. We'd get back to the real stuff soon enough. Near the end of one of Maree's old favourites, Jefferson Airplane's *Surrealistic Pillow*, we'd start shaking one another like skeletons dancing over gravestones, and then we'd come, but it wouldn't be an explosion but a sort of melting, young bodies dripping like wax, disappearing from the flat, evaporating from each other's arms and visiting the stars.

Later we'd dab our knees with Michael's mercurochrome. He stole things from the hospital; his medicine cabinet was like a well-stocked Emergency Ward. Our generation believed it was only fair that the world should give us whatever we wanted, and we took it all like greedy young dogs.

Maree Klimister, outlandish poet, never-ending pleasures. That was 1973. Go on, try to tell me you had a better year.

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